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Pargeting Over Trauma:

Virginia Woolf's Portrayal of Post-WWI London Across One Day in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Virginia Woolf's Women: *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years*

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The end of the First World War saw major shifts in English society. Immediately following the war's conclusion, it became clear that "the war left a deep and lasting imprint on the city" (Goebel and White) as England was forced to reckon with the deaths of countless young men. The soldiers who did return had "seen and suffered unimaginable horrors" and brought with them "an array of psychological and physical traumas" (Roller). Moreover, society now recognized that warfare technology was much more threatening with the introduction of fighter pilots. In his 1932 Armistice Day speech, Stanley Baldwin stated that "[up] to the time of the last war, civilians were exempt from the worst perils of war" and that now "there is no power on earth that can protect [civilians] from being bombed…The bomber will always get through" (airandspaceforces.com). Not only did England have to cope with its massive loss of soldiers, but it also recognized that civilians were no longer invulnerable. In her 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf investigates this new reality after a global event that "bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears" (Woolf 10). While exploring one June day in 1923 London, Woolf reveals that the city aches from the war's effects but simultaneously rejects that such is the case—illustrating this through her characters Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway. While Septimus embodies London's trauma, Clarissa represents the upper-middle class's willful ignorance of it.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*'s day-long narrative, Septimus exhibits one of the war's most prevalent impacts on London: the lasting emotional and psychological damage inflicted upon its youth. Before his service, Septimus was an aspiring poet. Woolf writes that at this time, the Warren Smiths' gardener would have "found him writing; found him tearing up his writing; found him finishing a masterpiece at three o'clock in the morning" (91). He was a creative and hopeful soul, even going so far as to move to London since "he could see no future for a poet in Stroud"

(Woolf 90). By 1923, this attitude left Septimus completely. On this day, Septimus flips through his copy of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Woolf writes, "How Shakespeare loathed humanity…was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair" (95). Since witnessing the horrors of war, Septimus has lost his artistic appreciation and optimism, turning bitter and cynical. The same writing that once was beautiful now betrays only ugly sentiments meant to corrupt the reader; he has lost his love for literature and his faith in the world.

Septimus's wartime experiences further affected him by robbing him of his emotions. Throughout this June day, Septimus frequently reflects on his unfeeling nature and its ramifications. He remembers the death of his commanding officer and good friend Evans, recalling how "far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, [Septimus] congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him" (Woolf 92). After the pain of his military service, Septimus could only cope if he were to repress his emotions completely, and he can no longer feel as a result. He recognizes the issue's origin—that "his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then—that he could not feel" (Woolf 94). The condition's cause is not any trait intrinsic to Septimus but rather the war's abuse. This condition weighs heavily on Septimus's conscience: Woolf describes his innermost thoughts, "He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes [of unfeeling] raised their heads…The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death" (97). Plagued and taunted by the consequences of his emotionless state, Septimus believes himself to be condemned and irredeemable, all due to the psychological damage he underwent.

The damage does not stop there; in addition to his emotions, the war stole Septimus's sanity. Over the course of the novel, the young man often hallucinates and seems to have lost his grip on reality. When a car backfires in the street, he reacts disproportionately, seeing that "[t]he world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (Woolf 16). Suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—in 1923 known as shell shock—Septimus envisions the world ending in response to something as simple as a loud car, indicating that he is clearly unwell. This illness also manifests in his paranoia: after going with his wife to meet with doctors, Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw, Septimus thinks in horror, "So he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him! The brute with the red nostrils was snuffing into every secret place!" (Woolf 157). Septimus sees these doctors as schemers seeking only to gain total control over him, resulting in him fearing for his safety and autonomy. Another extreme symptom of his mental illness is his recurring hallucination of Evans. Back in his home, Septimus believes that a "voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him" (Woolf 99). Evans stands as an almost tangible expression of the war's impact—he repeatedly appears over the course of the day, demonstrating that trauma from the war has not been resolved but remains equally pressing, even five years later.

Woolf's greater argument regarding society's neglectful handling of this trauma emerges with Septimus's medical treatment. Throughout the day, Septimus and his wife Rezia discuss his health with multiple doctors. Septimus's treatment begins with Dr. Holmes, who mistakenly assesses Septimus as perfectly fine, stating that "there was nothing the matter with him" (Woolf 71) and dismissing the "headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams" as "nerve symptoms and nothing more" (Woolf 97). Yet, when Septimus and Rezia seek a second opinion from the distinguished Sir William Bradshaw, Sir William "could see the first moment they came into the

room…it was a case of extreme gravity [and of] complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage" (Woolf 102). Sir William finds Septimus's condition extreme, completely contradicting Dr. Holmes's prior opinion. Still, even Sir William fails adequately to help. Even once he sees the severity of the situation, he prescribes Septimus "a long rest in bed" (Woolf 103) and attempts a comforting comment in the form of "We all have our moments of depression" (Woolf 104), downplaying the intensity of Septimus's mental illness. Leaving his office, Rezia finds these orders entirely insufficient, concluding that "[s]he had asked for help and been deserted" and that Sir William "had failed them" (Woolf 105). These doctors' dismissive attitudes epitomize society's inability to confront and to deal properly with the residual trauma that so pervades post-war London.

This inability to resolve the underlying problem, as Woolf argues, ultimately results from the upper-middle class's privilege. Sir William exemplifies this in his style of medical practice. Woolf characterizes him as craving respect and obedience, describing how his goal is to "[make] it impossible for the unfit to propagate views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion…so that not only did his colleagues respect him, his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude" (106). Sir William enjoys feeling powerful and often flexes his superiority over his patients: during medical appointments, he aims "to prove (if the patient was obstinate) that Sir William was master of his own actions, which the patient was not" (Woolf 108). His cavalier attitude toward Septimus's treatment stems not from outright cruelty but from privilege. As Woolf explains with an ironic tone, he "not only prospered himself[1] but made England prosper" (106), so the public feels indebted to him no matter whether he truly considers his patients' needs. He may treat his patients as he pleases,

[1] Sir William prospers financially as well as reputationally: he profits off his patients beyond the initial medical appointments by prescribing them months of rest in homes he owns (Woolf 104, 106).

even base treatment decisions on what most benefits him monetarily, and society will regardless thank him for handling the "unfit."

This entitled and uncaring perspective, as well as the polite society that indulges it, prevents post-war London from healing and indeed agitates its wounds—as Septimus's suicide demonstrates. Despite the anguish it causes him, Septimus's depression does not initially elicit in him a desire to end his life. On the contrary, Septimus at first seems content with living, his illness notwithstanding. He ruminates, "The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes?...Besides, now that he was quite alone…there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity" (Woolf 99). Even moments before he carries out the act, he contemplates, "He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want?" (Woolf 159). The chief impetus for Septimus's decision to kill himself is external pressure, not an internal wish. Further illuminating this point is the fact that Septimus does not attempt this final step until he feels cornered by Dr. Holmes. When the doctor arrives at his home, Septimus considers how "[i]t was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's…Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing" (Woolf 159). Just before jumping out of his window, Septimus cries, "I'll give it to you!" (Woolf 159), marking his death as what he understands to be the doctors' wish fulfillment. This act is not a reflection of his own desire but rather is a reaction to the uncaring elite around him: he does what he presumes they want and expect from him. Woolf uses Septimus's demise to highlight that until post-war society recognizes its trauma and works to heal those most harmed by it, similar tragedies will yet occur.

While Septimus represents London's unresolved trauma and its tragic consequences, Clarissa Dalloway stands for the privileged class that refuses to acknowledge them. Clarissa, an upper-middle class socialite, appears on the surface untouched by the war. She views it as

something that happened to others, believing that "[t]he War was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed…or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed" (Woolf 4). Clarissa sees how people around her still suffer from the war to the extent that it effectively has never ended. But for her, the war is over—her life has not been permanently changed like the others' have. She remains wealthy with a politically influential husband and a beautiful daughter, and she passes the time by engaging in frivolity and extravagance, periodically throwing parties in her stately home. She seems impervious to the war's psychological effects.

However, on a deeper level, Clarissa has been significantly affected. She is preoccupied with thoughts of death: after contemplating the aspects of life that content her, she thinks, "After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end" (Woolf 131). Her reflections on her fruitful life are darkened by the notion of it all ending. Clarissa experiences a borderline obsession with mortality; her mind cannot go long without wandering back to the morbid. Similarly, when out shopping in the morning, Clarissa wonders, "did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?" (Woolf 9). This particular reflection on death recognizes a comfort in its finality. The war has impacted Clarissa more significantly than she realizes, its horrors weakening her attachment to life. Reinforcing this point is the poetry that Clarissa reads in a bookshop window: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages" (Woolf 9). This excerpt from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* comprises the beginning of a funeral song that laments life and welcomes death (Tearle), and its prominence emphasizes Clarissa's new perspective: she sees the world as a much darker place since the Great War. Like Septimus, Clarissa has been fundamentally changed by the war's trauma. The difference between the two is

that whereas Septimus is irreparably and inescapably affected by that trauma, Clarissa is privileged enough to pretend it has not affected her at all.

Clarissa spends the majority of her day assembling a party. While this frivolous celebration at first seems incongruous with the residual pain and fear permeating London, upon scrutiny it exposes itself as a coping mechanism; it holds symbolic meaning for Clarissa, representing her longing to return to a pre-war world. This manifests most clearly in how Clarissa intentionally excludes her cousin, Ellie Henderson, from the guest list. Ellie's perspective explains why her presence is unwanted: she finds herself "more disqualified year by year to meet well-dressed people who did this sort of thing every night of the season [whereas she] bought cheap pink flowers, half a dozen, and then threw a shawl over her old black dress" (Woolf 180). Ellie recognizes that she is of a much lower status than the habitual attendees, earning only "three hundred pounds' income" and existing in a "weaponless state (she could not earn a penny)" with no formal training (Woolf 180). Clarissa attempts to prevent Ellie from attending because her presence would shatter the illusion Clarissa tries so hard to maintain: that London is the same now as it was before the war. World War I led to major shifts in the dynamics between social classes (Roller) and contributed to the breakdown of inter-class barriers. Ellie's attendance represents this change and contradicts the image of pre-war London, at which time she would not have been invited. By working so hard to exclude her lower-class cousin, Clarissa reveals that she cares less for the party itself than what, in her mind, it proves: that London has returned to its pre-war state and is no longer tainted by death and terror. The mirage of normalcy and social tradition is crucial to Clarissa's peace of mind.

As Clarissa unfortunately discovers, this delusion and the solace that depends upon it are incredibly fragile. Despite her efforts to uphold the pretense that London is the same now as it

was before the war, she cannot fully shelter her party from reality. In conversation with Lady Bradshaw, Clarissa learns of Septimus's suicide and starts at the information: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (Woolf 196). This sudden confrontation with the ugly truth of post-war London shocks Clarissa, and she leaves alone to another room to recover, feeling that "[t]he party's splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery" (Woolf 196). The illusion has been ruined now that Clarissa stands alone with her thoughts, forced to consider the young man's passing. Sent panicking into a spiral, she thinks,

> A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident…But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party! (Woolf 196-7)

Clarissa's mind is consumed by the event, so much so that she imagines experiencing it herself. Further, the scattered and repetitive nature of Clarissa's thoughts depict the cognitive dissonance she undergoes when pulled so suddenly from her delusion. Once she adjusts, she considers Septimus's fate as well as her own, realizing that "[s]he felt very like him—the young man who had killed himself" (Woolf 199). It is not until she is alone that Clarissa finally sees in herself the same post-war stress that led to Septimus's death. Separated from the delusion and ignorance her party represents, she recognizes the profound psychological effect that the war has had on her.

This is not the only epiphany that Clarissa has, however. She also realizes the crucial difference between herself and Septimus that resulted in her living while he died—their socioeconomic status. Clarissa summarizes their contrasting outcomes of the war: "She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself" (Woolf 198). Her privilege, manifesting as her

parties and other distractions, shields her from having fully to confront the war's fallout. She continues, "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress" (Woolf 198). From her position of wealth and advantage, Clarissa has never had to acknowledge the trauma haunting post-war London, and she minutes ago was willfully blind to it. Like Sir William Bradshaw, Clarissa stands for an upper-middle class that refuses to address or even to acknowledge that trauma. In this final moment of clarity after leaving her delusion, she now understands the wrongness of that position, believing herself punished for allowing the less fortunate to suffer while she turns a blind eye.

Mrs. Dalloway provides a blueprint for how post-war London may move forward. Through Septimus and Clarissa, Woolf presents her argument for the necessity of London to admit that its war-inflicted wounds still hurt; until then, as Septimus's story illustrates, society's suffering will continue unabated. Throughout her novel, Woolf shows that while "[t]his late age of world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears," it also enforces "a perfectly upright and stoical bearing" (10), which is the true cause of post-war London's current plight. By acting as though the pain of war has passed, society prevents any possible progress. Woolf paves the way for positive social change by demonstrating that only when the privileged accept this trauma, as Clarissa has, can London begin to heal.

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